

The Intelligence Challenge in the Phenomenon of Delegitimization

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Delegitimization of Israel was identified as a central political and security challenge as early as the Durban Conference in 2001. The significance of this challenge has increased greatly in recent years, especially against the backdrop of formative events such as the deadlock in the peace process, the rounds of violent confrontations in Gaza, the Goldstone Report on Operation Cast Lead, the international legal campaign after Operation Protective Edge, and the international response to the *Mavi Marmara* incident. Another development that has contributed to the momentum of the delegitimization movement is the Palestinian Authority's decision to engage in an international diplomatic struggle and have the international community impose a one-sided arrangement on Israel not reached through negotiations. To this end, the Palestinian Authority seeks to harm Israel's image and undermine its legitimacy. The efforts to delegitimize Israel are reflected in a variety of arenas and include political, legal, and economic battles as well as demonstrations and public protests. In most cases, the perpetrators of delegitimization disguise their goal as criticism of Israeli government policy. Especially prominent in recent years are the activities of the BDS movement, which is characterized by network-based activity by organizations and activists in a number of leading hubs in the Western world and impacts a wide range of areas, from the academic, ideological, and cultural arenas to the economic and other arenas, such as sports.

Since in recent years the challenge of delegitimization has been defined as a national security challenge, the intelligence community must also join the efforts to address the issue, even if it is beyond its traditional, more natural field of operations. In response to the claim that the challenge would be better addressed by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs or NGOs, we contend that certain aspects of BDS activities require continuous, systematic, and covert operations by the intelligence community (including the gathering of intelligence and influence).

The *Mavi Marmara* incident in May 2010 was an important turning point in the approach of the Israeli security establishment, including the intelligence community, toward the delegitimization challenge. The incident proved that the delegitimization campaign can lead to political escalation (in this case between Israel and Turkey) and exact a heavy political toll. The efforts to learn and synchronize the political response to the delegitimization challenge were coordinated at that time by the Ministry of Strategic Affairs, headed by Minister Moshe (“Bogie”) Ya’alon. Both identification of the need for intelligence preparedness and response and the familiarity of the minister and senior ministry staff with the intelligence community aided communication with intelligence echelons, particularly Military Intelligence, and led to the creation in 2011 of a department specializing in the delegitimization issue in the intelligence’s research division. The Ministry of Strategic Affairs allocated a budget to support the creation of this department¹ and developed a format for cooperation between them. The research conducted by the research division is then published according to the distribution regulations of other publications of Military Intelligence and those of the intelligence and terrorism center of the Intelligence Heritage Center. Information is collected by the intelligence collection unit, with an emphasis on open sources (OSINT). While we lack information on the activities of covert intelligence collection bodies of the IDF or other intelligence organizations (the Israel Security Agency and Mossad), we assume that they too will have made certain adjustments, since the nature of this mission is different from their core missions.

This article discusses the main system-wide tasks of the intelligence community regarding the delegitimization challenge, analyzes relevant tensions, difficulties, and problems, and highlights the unique issues that the intelligence community must address. Areas where the Ministry of Foreign Affairs – which is responsible for advocacy efforts, including the positive

branding of Israel – has a comparative advantage are beyond the scope of this article. We address a number of central questions: is delegitimization, in fact, an intelligence challenge? What is the essence of this challenge, and what is its unique nature? How should the intelligence community deal with the intelligence challenge (with an emphasis on ethical issues)? What are the barriers and obstacles facing the intelligence community in dealing with the challenge, and how should it handle them? How should the intelligence community relate to civilian bodies involved in the struggle against delegitimization?

The Main Role of the Intelligence Services

The first role of intelligence is to monitor and analyze the delegitimization phenomenon as a security and strategic challenge. It should be assumed that the phenomenon will change over time, since its advocates are on a learning curve that responds to challenges from Israeli and international systems. The intelligence community must identify these changes and bring them to the attention of the leadership. The intelligence community must work to address the delegitimization challenge together with government ministries, such as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Strategic Affairs,² and research institutes such as the Reut Institute³ and the Institute for National Security Studies.⁴

The intelligence response can be classified into three levels: strategic, operational, and conceptual. The strategic level requires characterizing the overall structure of the phenomenon and understanding its rationale, trends, center of activity, and network characteristics. Such insight should create the foundations for understanding the phenomenon and distinguishing between delegitimization efforts and general criticism of Israeli government policy. On the operational level, an intelligence picture must be formed in order to support and guide operative efforts. This picture must include the infrastructures of the organizations, their activists, and their *modus operandi* as well as their plans of action. The conceptual level requires a deep understanding of the delegitimization phenomenon and its areas of operation in order to create the knowledge infrastructure required to intervene and influence trends that are advantageous to Israel. It is in this sphere of activity that the ethical dilemmas facing the intelligence community emerge. One of these is the fact that the intelligence services are required to influence the object of their research in conjunction with the messages that Israel is trying to

impart. In such cases, there is a danger of surrendering to prejudices that stem from concentrating more on the influence of the research object than other aspects, and this can affect the quality of the research.

There are essential interfaces and interactions between the three levels of intelligence activity. After characterizing the system – namely, forming a clear conceptualization of the phenomenon and its goals and methods – the intelligence community must examine its components and create the knowledge base needed to address the displays of delegitimization and its agents.⁵ Delegitimization must be approached as a network phenomenon in which it is sometimes difficult to identify the leaders and to locate its centers of gravity (global cities that contain a concentration of international media, government and legal institutions, academic institutions, NGOs, and human rights organizations). Messages and actions hostile to Israel emanate from these centers of gravity, and the intelligence community must characterize their methods of operation and their unique characteristics.⁶

In addition, the intelligence agencies are required to provide advance warning about the development of specific anti-Israel delegitimization campaigns, so that they can be prevented or disrupted.⁷ Anti-Israel delegitimization campaigns can be broad and decentralized, such as the apartheid week held at a number of prominent locations around the world, or smaller and more focused, such as protest flotillas or flyovers. Both types demand intelligence for location and for guidance in order to prevent or minimize their influence, using the various bodies and mechanisms at Israel's disposal.⁸ Special emphasis should be placed on social networks, which serve as convenient and efficient platforms for disseminating messages, organizing delegitimization activities, fundraising, and recruiting supporters and activists.⁹

Prevention and disruption can be implemented through a variety of means and methods in which intelligence plays a central role, including:

- a. Maligning and incriminating delegitimization activists for their collaboration with terrorist organizations and with organizations and countries that violate human rights;
- b. Exposing their methods of fundraising and the dubious validity of their resources;
- c. Disclosing information on the personal histories of delegitimization activists that includes breaking the law or contravening accepted Western norms;

- d. Coordinating with friendly countries, governments, and intelligence organizations in order to prevent activities (e.g., collaborating with the local governments to stop flotillas sailing from Greece or Cyprus);
- e. Actively sabotaging delegitimization activities (e.g., legal battles against anti-Israel activists and protests and counter-demonstrations against delegitimization actions while they are taking place).

The intelligence community must develop the ability to distinguish between the activists and leaders of the delegitimization campaign¹⁰ and the supporters. While the former constitute the ideological, militant, and organizational hard core, the latter include many who do not necessarily distinguish between criticism of Israeli government policy and actual delegitimization. An intelligence infrastructure is required that is able to vilify the former while working with the latter in order to identify potential discussion partners with whom diplomatic and other relevant bodies (such as Jewish groups or other organizations that identify with Israel) can develop channels of dialogue and persuasion.

Analyzing the Challenge: The Problems, Difficulties, and Uniqueness of Providing an Intelligence Response

The intelligence community must be persuaded to recognize the importance of the issue at hand and to invest in the necessary intelligence collection, research, and technology. The allocation of a few researchers is not enough; without investment in additional intelligence-gathering efforts and technological resources, the researchers will have no relative advantage over civilian bodies that receive their information from open sources alone. This challenge is not trivial, since it seemingly contradicts the traditional areas in which the intelligence community operates – army, security, and policy – and involves consumers who are not their usual “clientele” (such as the army, decision makers, and other intelligence organizations). Some of the coordinators of this intelligence on delegitimization will need, with the necessary adjustments, to assist state and non-state organizations that are not actually security organizations but whose contribution may prove essential and irreplaceable.

It is not easy to allocate the appropriate resources and create intelligence outputs for bodies that are outside of the security and intelligence communities. It entails a conceptual shift within the entire intelligence community due also to the need to allocate resources for an intelligence review of civil

society organizations, be they in the Palestinian Authority or in Europe and the United States. These organizations are not traditionally defined as a security threat and are not usually a high priority for intelligence coverage; in most cases, the intelligence community has limited access to them and lacks knowledge and experience dealing with them.

The intelligence community must, therefore, develop connections with civilian bodies in order both to collect and develop information and to learn and promote an integrative approach. Israeli intelligence agencies must learn the corresponding system that deals with that same challenge – a complex system that includes government ministries, research institutes, private entities in Israel, and Jewish organizations outside of Israel. The “using-a-network-to-fight-a-network” principle should, it seems, be applied by creating connections with civilian bodies in order to develop intelligence that is also based on non-classified sources and by passing this intelligence on so that these civilian bodies can make operative use of it.¹¹ It is important to note that some of the civilian bodies may not want to be in direct contact with Israeli intelligence agencies due to their emphasis on being independent and their assumption that being identified as Israeli agents or representatives would harm their public standing and their ability to influence. Moreover, even if the bodies do want to cooperate, language gaps and gaps between military and civilian culture will need to be bridged.

In order to fulfill the principle of integrative intelligence activity, the intelligence community, along with other governmental and private parties, must examine what its comparative advantage is and where to focus covert political efforts. In certain centers of activity, such as American university campuses, it would not be appropriate for the intelligence community to develop independent capabilities; rather, it should depend on civilian organizations for whom universities are their natural environment. On the other hand, there are civilian bodies that are eager for quality intelligence that only the intelligence community can develop. It must arrange for the transfer of intelligence to such bodies and create special integrative mechanisms to ensure that its assessments are conveyed to the relevant parties in a timely manner.

Technology offers many opportunities for creating net-based connections between intelligence bodies and civilian bodies, but the main obstacles to such integration are conceptual, procedural, and security. In addition, the intelligence community will need to improve its ability to “launder” classified

intelligence products and allow them to reach the relevant organizations that are partners in the struggle against delegitimization. The tension between maintaining the security of sources and fully using intelligence for action exists in many other areas. In the case of the battle against delegitimization, however, it is greater, because most of the clients of intelligence products are civilian bodies, which lack the tradition of maintaining the security of their sources.

The intelligence community must also acquire and develop special areas of knowledge for the intelligence campaign against delegitimization. These areas differ according to developments on the other side, and the leaders of intelligence efforts must thus identify them, particularly those that are not their natural territory. One example is the legal domain, a central element of the delegitimization campaign. The intelligence community must develop knowledge on international and local law in the relevant countries and involve legal advisors in order to research the phenomenon and direct intelligence collection efforts accordingly. This also applies to the economic, cultural, and media domains.

Ethics: Between Intelligence and Policy

There are those who maintain that there is a gap between the delegitimization campaign's true strength and its apparent strength, and that the phenomenon is magnified by grouping the true delegitimization advocates with those who harshly and virulently criticize Israeli government policy and seek to bring about change in its approach to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. It is important to emphasize that as harsh and virulent as they may be, these critics do not reject the State of Israel's right to exist as the nation-state of the Jewish people or Israel's right to defend itself.¹² This magnification of the delegitimization phenomena, whether intentional or not, serves the interests of a government policy that does not advance the peace process, since it helps to blur the distinctions between the two groups and intensifies the sense of threat in a way that encourages the preservation of the existing policy. Under these conditions, the intelligence community could face an ethical dilemma involving the leadership. It must therefore describe the strategic challenge as it understands it, challenge the worldview of the decision makers, and not make the intelligence efforts fit one specific policy. It should, likewise, dedicate resources to verify the phenomenon, even if the

result of the research is to disprove it or to present an intelligence picture that is not consistent with the leadership's policy.

As with all other strategic challenges, the intelligence community encounters dilemmas regarding its interpretations, influence, and even implementation of policies and is required to express opinions about the relevance of government strategy and policy. In the case of addressing delegitimization, this is even more necessary, since it must provide material that will assist with advocacy, ideological activity, and psychological warfare. This could create tension between the way the intelligence community analyzes material from a systematic perspective and the "products" it is asked to generate, which may seem to have been "ordered"; the intelligence community may even extol the policy and thus lose the ability to criticize it.¹³

Another challenge is the concern that intelligence assessments of the delegitimization phenomenon could be used for political purposes, especially if left-wing Israeli organizations are directly or indirectly involved in the delegitimization campaign. The intelligence community would thus find itself in an ethical dilemma not found when dealing with traditional adversaries in the Middle East. Indeed, there have been voices of criticism in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs about the involvement of the intelligence community in general and the army in particular in this issue, since there is a basic disagreement about the concept of delegitimization and about what is considered legitimate criticism of government policy and what is not.¹⁴ There has been similar criticism of the added value of Military Intelligence's involvement with the delegitimization phenomenon. However, as the scope of the phenomenon becomes clear, it becomes increasingly apparent that the intelligence agencies can have a significant contribution with particular regard to covert intelligence collection, systematic understanding, focused research, and influence.

Conclusion

The delegitimization phenomenon is a new national security challenge for Israel, and once identified as such, the intelligence community must provide an appropriate response. Intelligence agencies must assess it, as they do all other strategic phenomena that are based on a changing and learning system, and point out the varying dynamics to decision makers and to those involved in operative actions. The intelligence agencies must determine whether delegitimization is one monolithic challenge or whether

it is a range of challenges, some of which do not oppose the existence of Israel but rather criticize its national policies. This issue reveals the ethical tension facing the intelligence community: on the one hand, it must deliver the goods asked of it (in other words, it must serve the government's policy), but it is also required to challenge the worldview of the leadership. There are those who claim that putting all of those who oppose Israel in the same basket of delegitimization serves the interests of those who are not interested in initiating a peace process; the intelligence community must be aware of this claim.

The central intelligence tasks are to identify and characterize the delegitimization phenomenon using a comprehensive and strategic perspective, to relate to the operational level with specific systems and public displays, to assist in the prevention or disruption of these actions, and to operate on the level of consciousness, which it is also capable of influencing. The intelligence community must describe the delegitimization system and its main players – key figures and bodies and the connections between them – and the ways in which messages are transmitted online between the participants. A focus on key figures is also required in order to take action that will thwart their campaigning efforts.

One of the main challenges is the need for combined action with civilian bodies that are partners in knowledge development, including research institutes and the operative bodies who make use of the information. To this end, mechanisms must be developed for the quick release of intelligence material without damaging the security of the sources.

Notes

- 1 Barak Ravid, "Military Intelligence Begins to Track the Activity of Foreign Left-Wing Organizations," *Haaretz*, March 20, 2011.
- 2 Major Ofer, "The Campaign to Delegitimize the IDF's Actions," *Maarachot* 434, December 2010.
- 3 *Israel's Delegitimization Challenge: Building a Political Firewall*, Reut Institute, February 2010. English version, March 2010, available at <http://reut-institute.org/data/uploads/PDFVer/20100310%20Delegitimacy%20Eng.pdf>.
- 4 Yehuda Ben Meir and Owen Alterman, "The Delegitimization Threat: Roots, Manifestation, and Containment," in *Strategic Survey for Israel 2011*, eds. Anat Kurz and Shlomo Brom (Tel Aviv: Institute for National Security Studies, 2011), pp. 121-37, <http://www.inss.org.il/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/The-delegitimization-threat.pdf>.

- 5 An example of such coverage is the analysis of BNC (BDS National Committee) in Ramallah, which presents itself as the leadership of the BDS campaign, Meir Amit Intelligence Heritage Center, October 22, 2015, http://www.terrorism-info.org.il/Data/articles/Art_20893/H_187_15_906019859.pdf, or more comprehensive coverage that analyzes “The Place of the Palestinians in the BDS Campaign,” July 29, 2015, <http://www.terrorism-info.org.il/he/20851/>.
- 6 *Israel's Delegitimization Challenge of Israel: Building a Political Firewall*.
- 7 For example, intelligence should point out that events from Operation Pillar of Defense are being leveraged for lawsuits against Israel, Meir Amit Intelligence Heritage Center, April 29, 2013, <http://www.terrorism-info.org.il/he/20506/>.
- 8 For example, “The Italian Flotilla as a Case Study,” Meir Amit Intelligence Heritage Center, February 27, 2013, <http://www.terrorism-info.org.il/he/20485/>, or “Tracking the French Delegation to the Gaza Strip,” Meir Amit Intelligence Heritage Center, December 31, 2012, <http://www.terrorism-info.org.il/he/20457/>.
- 9 Maya Epstein, “The New Follower on Twitter,” *The Marker*, April 4, 2013.
- 10 An example of such research is an article about the head of the al-Haq Organization who leads the legal campaign against Israel, Meir Amit Intelligence Heritage Center, June 5, 2013, <http://www.terrorism-info.org.il/he/20523>.
- 11 *Israel's Delegitimization Challenge of Israel: Building a Political Firewall*.
- 12 Doron Matza, “Delegitimization: The Left as a Blind Goat,” Molad website, November 30, 2015.
- 13 Ran Edelist, “Amen, As You Wish,” *Ynet*, January 24, 2002.
- 14 Ravid, “Military Intelligence Begins to Track the Activity of Foreign Left-Wing Organizations.”